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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: PROTEST TENTS COME DOWN AS SYRIANS BREATHE MORE  
EASILY

REF: DAM 06395

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for  
reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 23-24, the SARG dismantled the anti-Mehlis protest tents and took down some of the banners in Rawda Circle near the Embassy and in Umawiyeen Square. Our contacts say the SARG no longer needs the tents as a rallying point against international pressure. Rumors are running rampant over a purported agreement that guarantees decreased U.S. pressure on Syria in exchange for SARG steps to contain the Sunni-led insurgency in the run-up to and during Iraqi elections. As a result, President Bashar al-Assad is seen as a national hero, according to one contact. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On December 23-24, the SARG dismantled the protest tents and some of the banners (reftel) in Rawda Circle near the Embassy and in nearby Umawiyeen Square. SARG officials felt the tents were no longer needed to rally popular support against international pressure on the regime after the release of UNIIIC's second interim report, which was seen here as relatively favorable to Syria, according to Damascus-based Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi. SARG officials were also relieved by the absence of additional sanctions on the country in UNSCR 1644 after the release of the second report, Hamidi noted. Parliamentarian Hashem Akkad, who is a business partner of Syrian Military Intelligence Chief Assef Shawkat, told us that Shawkat worked for days to have the tents dismantled because he felt they were sending a combative and counterproductive message to the USG. Shawkat prevailed once those opposing him sensed a slacking of tension, largely due to the equivocal nature of the second Mehlis report, Akkad said.

¶3. (C) Rumors are running rampant of a U.S.-Syria deal in which Washington reduces pressure on Syria in exchange for the SARG's recent steps to contain the Sunni-led insurgency in the run-up to and during Iraqi elections, according to Hind Kabawat, who is a board member of the Syria Public Relations Association that helped organize the set-up of the tents and printing of some of the banners. The "deal" also includes Ambassador's Scobey's imminent return to post, Hamidi said. (Comment: Rumors of the deal have spread to such an extent that a French Embassy contact asked about its existence.) Some observers, such as Fouad Sandouk who is an associate to influential businessman Sa'eb Nahhas and civil society activist Daad Mousa, acknowledged that the SARG is probably propagating rumors of a U.S.-Syria deal, but they also point to what they see as a recent absence of negative USG public statements on Syria to explain their own belief

that an agreement has been struck.

¶4. (C) Syrians see the dismantling of the tents as a sign that Syria has outwitted those seeking to pressure the regime, and they consider President Asad a national hero, Kabawat said.

¶5. (C) Comment: The above conversations with our contacts occurred before January 2 press reports that the UN commission would seek to interview President Asad, Syrian FM Farouk al-Shara'a and former Syrian VP Abdel-Halim Khaddam in connection with the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri. It remains unclear whether that news will undermine the regime's burgeoning confidence that it has emerged from this crisis unscathed and no longer needs to manufacture public shows of support. In addition, with public participation at the protest tents flagging, the regime likely calculated that their usefulness as an instrument to build support for Asad had been outlived.

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